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Student Engagement and Professional Development in an Innovative Learning Community

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Community colleges serve an important role in higher education. They are the starting point for many students who arrive at the community college with varying knowledge, skills, abilities, and background. Members of the faculty then have the great task and responsibility of preparing these students for transfer, graduation, or completion of vocational and technical certificates. Recently, with community colleges demonstrating a graduation or completion rate of less than 50%, the traditional focus on open access has been augmented with a new emphasis on retention and graduation. In this climate, community college faculty are investigating and applying various strategies and techniques to ensure student engagement and, hopefully, completion. Learning communities represent an important response to a number of community college needs. At the same time, community colleges, with their emphasis on teaching and curricular flexibility, are fertile ground for innovative methods. Thus the ground is ripe for the implementation of learning communities.

[W]e had not fully understood how deeply [the two disciplines] are entwined ... Now, for the first time, we realized the complexities of both studies—the thought and depth behind sociological theories, and the thought and research behind historical analyses.

Learning communities have a rich history. Since their beginning in 1927, these communities have been implemented in various ways at different institutions (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, pp. 17 – 18). The most basic notions of learning communities link together courses that enable a block of students to engage in the courses together (Tinto, 1995, pp. 11-13). Gabelnick et al. (1990) provide a more complete and complex description:

> A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (p. 19)

The potential benefits of learning communities are many. As summarized in the Piedmont Virginia Community College Learning Communities Task Force Report (2006):

> Research suggests that students learn more from courses that are integrated in a community then they do in isolated courses. In a learning community, concepts and skills are consciously reinforced within the context of each course…. As a result, students begin to understand the relationships between course contents and to apply new concepts to skills…. Belonging to a community of learners helps students feel they are an important part of the fabric of the academic community. (p. 1)

Fogarty et al. (2003) suggest that other benefits include fighting the fragmentation of knowledge and lack of curricular coherence, and allowing students to see how the views of faculty from different disciplines may differ on the same point. Similarly, Shapiro and Levine (1999) write, "Learning communities are curricular structures that allow faculty to teach, and students to learn, in more interdisciplinary, intellectually stimulating, and challenging ways. Students begin to recognize individual courses as part of an integrated learning experience rather than as separately taught requirements for a degree" (p. 4). Communities also encourage active learning. The unifying factor in all these ideas is that learning communities are an excellent method of fostering student engagement.

Since the beginning of the PVCC Learning Communities program in 2004, faculty have had success in forming learning communities to provide our students rewarding academic and intellectual experiences. Most of those communities had linked two developmental courses (reading/writing; writing/math), a developmental course with a non-developmental course, or any of those courses with an SDV class. Further, when two college credit classes were paired together, they linked a subject matter class with an academic process class (e.g., history with English composition, or chemistry with mathematics). While those communities were very successful, a number of faculty believed that it would be equally worthwhile, for students and faculty alike, to link together two academic subject matter courses.

After several years of informal discussions, the two of us decided to pair a sociology course with a United States history course. Because none of the college's previous learning communities had linked two such content courses, we were a bit unsure of how best to construct this new community. We were apprehensive, not only about whether the course materials would work together, but also how we could make this new linking a worthwhile learning experience. There was also the worry whether the community would attract enough students. Despite our uncertainties, we decided that this pairing was a learning community that the college needed, and so we proceeded with the project. With encouragement from the PVCC Learning Communities coordinator and support from our division dean we set to work planning our community.

The first question was at which level to link courses—introductory survey or upper level. Pairing the survey courses (HIS121/122, SOC200) had a number of benefits. The most obvious was that there is greater student demand for surveys

because many programs require history and social science credits, and thus the number of potential students would be quite large. An alternative was to link two upper level courses, in this case HIS270: America in the Gilded Age and SOC266: Minority Group Relations. A third alternative was to link one survey course with one upper level. The more we considered the possibilities, the more we gravitated to the upper level link. Several reasons factored into this decision: First, it would free us from the rigid structure that survey classes impose—a certain amount of specific material must be covered. In upper level classes we could tailor the two courses to intersect with each other more easily. In addition to this practical consideration, our discussions led us to believe that the upper level courses would be more academically and intellectually exciting for the students[1]. A second, and perhaps more selfish, reason was that such a link would be more exciting for us as well. The major obstacle to such a link was that both upper level courses are usually taken by students as electives; unlike the survey courses, they are not required in any programs. Many students have little desire to take courses not necessary for fulfillment of their curriculum plan. Our hope was that since both courses have traditionally been accepted by our usual transfer institutions, a certain number of students would be tempted to enroll. In addition, many of our survey students over the years have taken these and other upper level classes individually. Third, an issue often overlooked in worrying about the statistics of class size, we believed that many of our students would be interested in, and would benefit from, what we ourselves saw as a learning adventure. The numerous advantages of learning communities already discussed also helped guide our decision to pair upper-level classes since we believed that most of those advantages could best be obtained with such a linkage. Nevertheless, the numbers had to be taken into account. We were relieved when the dean said that he would accept somewhat lower enrollment than usual, justified by the fact that both of us have had large enrollments in our survey classes.

With the procedural concerns alleviated, we began the academic planning. The first question was how the two classes would be linked. Learning communities come in many forms, from what is basically team teaching with the two classes fully integrated and both instructors sharing the teaching load, to simply using a common theme for one assignment in each class[2]. Almost all PVCC learning communities have used a hybrid model—the two classes remain structurally independent and are listed in the Student Information System (SIS) under the individual discipline instructor. Each instructor teaches her or his course in the usual manner, using the usual material. Officially, these are simply two classes in the schedule. However, the schedule notes that both classes must be taken together, and the SIS is set so that students are blocked from enrolling on-line in either. They must obtain a manual override from staff who reinforce the requirement that both must be taken, and then enroll the student in both. To strengthen the community feeling, the dean tries to schedule the classes back-to-back in the same room.

[1] It is interesting that although a number of researchers stress "more opportunities for intellectual engagement" as a key advantage of learning communities (Fogarty et al., 2003, p. 3), most of their discussion pertains to developmental and lower-level communities.

[2] An excellent discussion of the structure and characteristics of various models is located in Shapiro and Levine (1999, pp. 16-42).

Faculty have found that once the structure is set, the key to learning community success is that both instructors be present in both classes. Sometimes the extra instructor is there simply for community support. Often, however, he or she takes an active (though unofficial and unpaid) role by helping with writing groups, taking part in class discussions, and serving as a resource on topics where the disciplines overlap. We decided that we would take notes in each other's class, both for our own knowledge and to demonstrate to students that even faculty members are constantly learning.

Funded by a grant from the PVCC Educational Foundation, we started in-depth planning of subject matter and classroom methods. To deal with subject matter, we first exchanged detailed outlines of the material covered in each course. Studying each other's material, we came to the belief that the two courses, while not perfectly congruent, fit together very well. The study of minority group relations by its very nature has a strong historical component. America in the Gilded Age, the late 19th century, was a time of great change, including social adjustments for and between a number of minority groups. Not only did the content of the courses fit together along a critical number of points, but it became clear that the two disciplines would, in fact, reinforce each other on many topics.

More detailed discussion strengthened this belief, as each of us suggested to the other where the points of overlap occurred. It was especially easy to fit the minority relations framework into the history course. HIS270: America in the Gilded Age is an attempt to immerse students in as many aspects of that period as possible, from politics to popular culture. The aim of the course is to show students how these various aspects reflected and related to each other in numerous ways. It is usually taught stressing certain themes, such as the role of energy and the status of the individual. Minority relations was a natural theme. Thus, the sociology class would be able to take a broader view of minority relations, while the history class could focus more on Gilded Age topics that related to groups.

To retain the substantive and structural integrity of both classes, we rejected the idea of joint assignments, so that each class had its own tests on the material covered in that class. However, each course requires a term paper, so a joint topic seemed possible. The Gilded Age paper always requires students to describe life in the Gilded Age based on research in Gilded Age newspapers. It appeared not only possible but intellectually advantageous to assign a paper that would have the students use the same resources but focus specifically on minority relations in the Gilded Age. This would require them to use the knowledge they had learned in both classes, and, in fact, force them to determine on their own the intersection of the two disciplines. It could serve as the capstone of the course. It would also allow faculty to assess student learning in both classes, with each faculty member determining the grade for her or his course.

We were careful not to over-plan. Personal and general PVCC experience has shown that while a planned structure is vital for a new learning community, in practice some ideas will work and some won't. It is necessary to be flexible once in the classroom, ready to change the structure on the fly. This means more than discarding flawed aspects. It often occurs that connections, both pedagogical and

substantive, develop unplanned and unexpected as the community proceeds. We did produce a set of learning objectives for the community as a whole. Students would be expected to (1) know and understand the major events, developments, and themes of the Gilded Age; (2) understand and illustrate major theories of social stratification; (3) discuss how the Gilded Age has affected our construction of social arrangements and the consequences; (4) demonstrate critical thinking skills by showing how historical institutions affect individual lives and behavior; and (5) improve writing skills through a major class assignment that combines both disciplines. We were ready to go.

Despite our fears of low attendance, eighteen students enrolled. The community went smoothly from the start. The sociology class had its usual teaching methods of lecture, videos, class discussion, and group discussions on different aspects of a topic, with each group then reporting on the material to the whole class. The history class was primarily lecture, with some discussion of interesting points, often initiated by student comments or questions. The different methods combined successfully and supported students with different learning styles. During the sociology class, the historian took notes, participated in class discussion, and volunteered historical information relevant to the topic. The sociologist sometimes asked him to clarify or expand on a historical point. In the history course, the sociologist took notes and frequently was asked to provide additional sociological perspective. The integration of the disciplines was strengthened even more with each of us consciously adding our own inter-disciplinary comments in our class. The sociologist emphasized the historical context of her points, while the historian reminded students of how a historical event or development matched and could often be explained by what they had already discussed in the sociology class. The fact that we were "students" in one another's class added a unique dimension to the community and greatly contributed to the success of the courses. Students enjoyed and appreciated the fact that we truly did see ourselves as students in the classes. They could quickly see that we were gaining a great deal of knowledge from one another's lectures and were engaged as learners in the classroom.

The unplanned lesson also occasionally arose. For example, both sociologists and historians have used the idea of the "melting pot" to describe American immigration, especially during the Gilded Age and early twentieth century. A mention of the origins of the term in the history class developed into a wider discussion of how the two disciplines use the term, and how the modern controversy over its validity has reflected both disciplines. Students had an example not only of how the disciplines overlap, but how direct interdisciplinary discussion can add to scholarly debate. On another occasion, the history class discussion of the industrialists of the Gilded Age, their contributions to society, and their historical importance tied in nicely with the sociology lecture on the eugenics movement. The fact that many of the Gilded Age leaders also contributed large amounts of money to eugenics was a thought-provoking connection.

One possible problem that we had initially worried about was time frame—SOC266 covers mostly contemporary America, while its historical issues involve all of United States history. HIS270 covers a narrow thirty-year span of that period.

However, there was no problem. Almost everything learned about minority relations could be applied to the Gilded Age. It also was valuable for the history students to see the modern outcomes of Gilded Age social problems. In return, the general historical approach and knowledge were valuable to students discussing minority relations. Additionally, the in-depth study of a different period allowed students to test more fully the theories of minority relations in two different historical contexts.

The size of the class proved to be perfect for dynamic discussion and debate. Almost all students contributed, which was especially rewarding since they were racially, ethnically, and economically diverse. Every student could relate to a specific group spanning both the sociological and historical material. The classroom itself was a laboratory for group interaction. In addition, since the students became acquainted with each other in the frequent SOC266 discussions, they felt more comfortable speaking in the Gilded Age class as well. In general, a strong feeling of community including students and instructors developed as the semester went on. Both of us enjoy humor in the classroom, and we were not averse at taking the occasional, cynical swipe at each other's discipline. The result was a relaxed and informal atmosphere in the classes, which was of value considering the serious and often controversial material being discussed.

The joint research paper was especially worthwhile. The students had to read an unedited mass of newspaper material and determine which articles and advertisements were helpful in understanding Gilded Age minority relations. This required that they have understood the theories and many different aspects of minority relations discussed in both classes. They then had to analyze and discuss the importance of the information to both history and sociology. While the quality of individual papers naturally varied, we were pleased that almost all the students carried out this aspect of the assignment well, showing that they had indeed absorbed the semester's interplay of the two disciplines. It was the strongest evidence that the learning objectives had been met.

Student response to all aspects of the course, as measured in both formal and informal feedback, was very positive. Formally, the mean for the course evaluations (when the two classes were averaged together) was a 4.75/5 (4=above average and 5=very high) for the following questions:

- The professor is interested in and enthusiastic about the course.
- Class presentations are clear and coherent from day to day.
- The professor recognizes when some students fail to understand and is helpful with problems.
- The professor encourages students to think for themselves.
- Overall, I would rate the quality of instruction in this class as (very high, above average, average, below average, very low)

Additionally, the evaluations yielded a 4.7/5 for the following questions:

- The course objectives were clearly explained.

- The expectations of the professor were clearly defined.
- The course discussions were consistent with course objectives.
- The course assignments were consistent with the course objectives.
- The grading procedures were appropriate, fair and impartial.

The students enjoyed both the community atmosphere and the discipline integration of the learning community, and the individual classes. What especially gratified us were the comments that demonstrated student understanding and appreciation of what the community was all about. A sample of comments from the semester evaluation includes the following:

> The Learning Community in this class was great, I think the school should keep pursuing it, it helps students interact with each other, as well as the professor.
>
> The class was a learning community with HIS-270 and the learning community aspect of this course made it all the more meaningful and enjoyable.
>
> The learning community class style was very interesting. I felt like it really provoked a good group dynamic and very intellectual class discussions.
>
> Having [the class] as a learning community made the class a completely different experience and thoroughly enjoyable.
>
> I hope that Dr. Pincus and Dr. Hoosier are able to teach in a Learning community again. Every student enjoyed the experience and many took a class they would never take otherwise.
>
> The class was a learning community with SOC 266 and the learning community aspect of this course made it all the more meaningful.

One student thought the community was valuable for "engaging overlapping discussions" and that "this learning community challenged the student to take the information from one course and apply it in a very tangible way to the other." It was, she wrote, "a fabulous academic experience in the academic journeys of all the students that participated." Perhaps the most satisfying indication of success was that, while the community was still in progress, several other students asked us when it would be taught again, since they had heard from those already taking part how exciting it was.

Our formal assessment of the project at the conclusion of the semester, submitted to and approved by the dean, illustrated the institutional level of success of the learning community. It stated that not only had the community accomplished its learning objectives, but the faculty as well as the students greatly enjoyed the intersection of the two disciplines. The class size was perfect for extensive and dynamic group discussions. The quality of the students was excellent, and the material seemed to come to life, providing interesting and important interdisciplinary connections. The assessment also noted that, with the faculty adding our own disciplinary

perspectives, the community had met all its learning objectives in the following manner:

- Students were able to learn both the major sociological theories of stratification and the main concepts of the Gilded Age through lecture, discussion, films, and assignments. Students were regularly assessed through exams and papers. The majority of the class was very successful in both types of assessments. The majority of students made either an A or B in both class sections.
- Students were able to clearly illustrate the connections of the Gilded Age to sociology in the major paper that was assigned. For this joint assignment, students were required to conduct primary historical research using Gilded Age newspapers. Students then had to discuss how minority groups were discussed and portrayed during the Gilded Age. This assignment allowed students the opportunity to see first-hand the intersection of sociology and history.
- Students were able to hone their critical thinking skills during discussion of scholarly articles, debates on provocative issues such as how Gilded Age robber barons contributed to the eugenics movement in the U.S., and conversation about various films and visual media. In these discussions, students were able to hear a wide variety of viewpoints to then refine their perspectives on both history and sociology.

We were happy that the community had been so successful for the students and the college. It had been successful for the faculty as well. With our different disciplines and teaching styles, we entered the project hoping to learn from each other, and we did. Further, the personal learning was not just in subject material. The historian gained a valuable new perspective on history that he had never pursued, now realizing that the discussion of history is, in fact, incomplete without that sociological perspective. The sociologist learned just how significant historical events were in shaping modern minority and dominant group relations. She has always stressed the significance of learning history in order to better understand contemporary relations, but this learning community forced her to see just how essential the past is in shaping the modern context. Sometimes the learning was specific. While the sociologist has always discussed Bacon's Rebellion in colonial Virginia for its early race and class context, the historian added background information that made the topic more complex, and thus more useful. In return, the explanation of minority-majority controversy in the sociology class helped the historian better understand some puzzling aspects of the composition of Gilded Age political parties. The substantive interplay continued throughout the semester. Even though previous to the community we had often superficially discussed the overlapping of our two disciplines, we had not fully understood how deeply they are entwined, and how much each of us depends on the other's discipline to effectively understand our own. Even as experienced scholars and teachers we had often made glib and lazy generalizations of the other's discipline in our teaching. Now, for the first time, we realized the complexities of both studies—the thought and depth behind sociological theories, and the thought and research behind historical analyses. In addition to gaining new respect for our own and the other discipline,

we learned that being a student again was a bit more perplexing and engaging than we remembered. We were able to view the world more from a student perspective to see both the beneficial and challenging aspects of higher education. Moreover, working so closely with a talented colleague strengthened our enthusiasm and passion for teaching. This learning community proved not only to be an innovative approach to teaching and learning but, at the same time, an incredible lesson in how disciplines intersect. It was, as we had hoped, intellectually exciting, academically worthwhile, and pedagogically valuable. It was, in the truest sense, extraordinary professional development.

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